

Why Dogs Are Not Allowed In Our Nature Parks

In 2003, the Nature Society received an e-mail inquiry about dogs in Tenhave Woods. The following is the e-mail message and our accompanying reply:

Hello,

I am a new resident to Royal Oak. I come to the city with two well-trained dogs. I have been actively looking for a park to take my dogs and I thought I found Quickstad to be the right one- except for the NO DOGS ALLOWED sign. I was wondering what the official explanation is for this and who made the decision. Also, I was wondering if your society supports this ban and if so, why? My dogs are well trained, ALWAYS clean up after them, and they can't harm the park anymore than I can, walking on the trails.

Thanks,
Andrew

REPLY:

Dear Andrew,

Both of our nature study areas (Tenhave Woods & Cummingston Park) have not allowed dogs for as long as I can remember. Both nature study areas have had signs as early as 1970 saying "no domestic animals allowed in park". When we restarted the nature programs back up in the year 2001, we found that both parks were used heavily by off leash dogs & owners. We tried for one year to correct this problem with signs stating, dogs must be on leash. This had no effect. We then had to add signs on the fences at all gates saying no dogs (on or off leash). This did not change park policy; it simply posted it in more places. This eliminated about half the dogs, but did not solve the problem.

The problem is that we have lost all of the ground nesting birds in both nature study areas. Dogs in Cummingston have killed a family of foxes and in the last year we have seen only one rabbit in each study area. There are more rabbits in southern Royal Oak backyards than in our nature study areas due to the maze of fences blocking the pursuit of dogs. With out rabbits, (an animal that should have a rather high population in both parks) certain plants grow rather than being eaten. This is slowly altering the plant community in both study areas to what is not normal for a southern Michigan forest. We are trying to prevent the degrading of the flora in the nature study area any further.

These two nature areas are unbelievably rich in diversity, this coupled with the fact that they are in one of the heaviest population areas in the state, make them of extreme value. Personally, I believe them to be the most valuable property in the city of Royal Oak and would be impossible to replace at any cost.

We hope to get the nature areas back to a level where they will be used by the Royal Oak schools as outdoor classrooms. In the last three years, we have gotten hundreds of people into the park on nature walks. Our volunteers staffing these programs have put in hundreds of hours. We have had untold hours put in by Scout groups building trails, bat and birdhouses.

We will never achieve our goals if we cannot control the dogs. Personally, I would like to eventually see non-barking dogs on leash allowed in study area. This is impossible until we have full time naturalists on duty. The only way to control the problem now, is to be able to ticket anyone with a dog in the park. If you represent a dog group, I would be willing to give your group a "leashed dog nature walk" and explain complexities of these forest. I am sure I could get permission for this as a special program.

The city has over 50 parks of which I believe five have dog run areas. We only have two nature study areas to try and save. I hope I have answered your questions on the nature study areas. If not, please contact me.

Bob Muller
Naturalist and Program Director
Royal Oak Nature Society

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